

Book Review:
Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy
Carlos Eire

Henry Pérez, Ph.D.
Professor of Foreign Languages

Waiting for Snow in Havana enters a very crowded arena of excellent memoirs, written in English, about young Cubans growing up both in Cuba and in the United States. In 1990, Pablo Medina published *Exiled Memories: A Cuban Childhood*. Virgil Suárez wrote *Spared Angola: Memories from a Cuban-American Childhood* in 1997. Flor Fernandez Barrios unveiled *Blessed by Thunder: Memoirs of a Cuban Girlhood* in 1999; and the most famous and popular memoir to date, the best-seller by Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming of Age in America*, appeared in 1995.

Waiting for Snow in Havana, a remarkable book, has been awarded the National Book Award for non-fiction. One of the surprising things about this book is that it reads like a novel, a Magical Realist novel that is. Perhaps we all have strange family members just like the author's or perhaps it is, after all, that a child's perception of reality is so wonderfully different from that of adults that it entralls the reader. Carlos Eire is Chair of the Department of Religion at Yale University and he, somehow, is able to deal with philosophical issues from a child's perspective, the memories of a child with the knowledge of an adult—like attempting to prove the existence of God, for example. After reading this work a couple of times, it is still unclear how the author maintains the wonderful insights of youth and the knowledge of old age intact and yet mingled.

Eire and his brother left Cuba under the Peter Pan program in the early '60s, two of 14,000 Cuban children who left Castro's Cuba without their parents with the help of the United States government and the Catholic Church. The Eire brothers were separated in exile and sent from one orphanage to another until their mother arrives in Chicago several years later.

"The world changed while I slept," begins the memoir, referring of course, to the change that occurred in Cuba on January 1, 1959, when Fidel Castro took over the government of Cuba after President Batista fled the Caribbean island. Carlos Eire divides the book into forty chapters plus an unnumbered chapter that deals with his nemesis, his adopted brother who stayed in Cuba, in Carlos' house with Carlos' father. The idyllic relationship between Carlos and his father starts dissolving after the adoption of a poor child whom his father identifies as his son from a previous incarnation when he was King Louis XVI of France. (Don't give up reading at this point, or you will miss a masterpiece.) The complete break between father and son takes place when the father refuses to leave Cuba with his family because he does not want to leave his art collection behind for the communists. Eire forgives his father years later, but not before changing his last name to his mother's maiden name.

Curiously, it is his father's profession - he was a judge - which gives Eire a more realistic view of Cuba than most other children who left Cuba before adulthood. His father would take him to court during summer vacation. Carlos' picture of Cuba as a paradise is amended by two exceptions, that is, unless you are black or poor.

The book is not presented in chronological order, and most of it takes place in Cuba with foreshadowing of what happened to him later in the United States. Carlos goes from the carefree age of eleven to all the responsibilities of being an adult when he has to take care of himself. When his mother reunites with both sons, they are all sent to Chicago, where his handicapped mother runs the house while the two teenagers go to high school and work full time at night.

Carlos Eire, like Medina, Suárez, Fernandez Barrios and Pérez Firmat, all speak for a whole generation of Cuban children whose childhoods were interrupted when they left their country behind, a country that has changed so radically in the last forty plus years. They all struggle daily to keep that Cuba alive, Cuba B.C. (Before Castro), because their present and future depends on their memories of a country that no longer exists.

Biography

Henry Pérez, a native of Cuba, graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Boston with a double major in English and Spanish. He received his doctorate in Spanish & Latin American Literature from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Dr. Pérez is the former chair of the Department of Modern Languages at Manchester College in Indiana. He has taught at Henderson since 1991.